

**NOT SO NICE COLORED GIRLS:
A VIEW OF TRACEY MOFFATT'S *NICE COLOURED GIRLS***

Caroline Vercoe
University of Auckland

Nice Coloured Girls is Tracey Moffatt's first film. Produced in 1987, this seventeen-minute film describes a tradition that has been passed down from her grandmother's and great-grandmother's generation—that of “picking up Captain.” Moffatt explains “since colonisation ‘picking up Captain’ has been a way for Aboriginal women to survive off white men.” Rather than creating new and empowered Aboriginal heroines for the 1990s, Moffatt chooses to site her characters within a colonial continuum. Her tradition begins with postcolonial contact and it is clearly formed by cross-cultural experiences. This essay focuses on the narrative structure of *Nice Coloured Girls* and discusses the ways in which Moffatt problematizes the notions of victim/colonized and exploiter/colonizer.

THREE ABORIGINAL WOMEN go on a night out into Sydney's Kings Cross. They go to a bar. One leaves, while the other two pick up a white man, whom they call Captain. He takes them to a restaurant, then on to a nightclub, where he eventually collapses drunk. The women steal his wallet and run laughing from the scene to escape in a taxi.

Tracey Moffatt's 1987 short film *Nice Coloured Girls* tells the story of a certain relationship between white men and black women.¹ Moffatt speaks of a tradition that has been passed down from her great-grandmother's generation—that of “picking up Captain.” Moffatt has said, “Since colonisation, ‘picking up Captain’ has been a way of Aboriginal women surviving off white men.” This tradition, however, does not involve Aboriginal Dreamings; it does not incorporate notions of the secret or the sacred. This essay offers a reading of Moffatt's *Nice Coloured Girls* that focuses on the way in which its narrative

structuring addresses themes of consent, conquest, and exchange between Aboriginal women and white men within both contemporary and historical contexts.

Throughout the film male colonial voices describe encounters between Aboriginal women and European men, always from the male's (or Captain's) point of view. These accounts were taken from eighteenth-century colonial diaries.² A series of subtitles describe the women's perspectives within these encounters. A number of nondiegetic scenes are inserted into the major narrative. Moffatt mimics documentary strategies of voice-over and subtitling as ways of representing Western and indigenous voices. Several shots involve framed pictures alluding to a colonial history. This dual narration raises a number of questions in relation to the representation of Aboriginal women and their interaction with white men in both the past and the present. Moffatt renders problematical the simple polarity of colonized/victim and colonizer/villain.³ By highlighting the presence of consent and knowingness within this cross-cultural dynamic, she challenges the conventional stereotype of Aboriginal women as always passive and silenced.

Events constantly spill over and out of the frame. *Nice Coloured Girls* asks us to look beyond the frame, the frame of the main narrative, the camera's frame, and the constructed frameworks of history that the film references. By juxtaposing eighteenth-century narratives with modern-day points of view, Moffatt layers historical and contemporary readings of urban Aboriginal women's experiences with white Captains. In doing this she suggests there has been little change in white men's attitudes toward Aboriginal women or in the women's attitudes toward the men. Moffatt also questions authorized versions of colonial histories by exposing indigenous experiences in relation to colonial framings and inscriptions. She unearths the richly layered dynamics of cross-cultural engagement and stereotyping. *Nice Coloured Girls* represents "truth" through the layering of points of view.

The film opens with an aerial shot of present-day Kings Cross. Superimposed upon it is an extract from a colonial account: "'One of them came into the water to the side of the boat, we ornamented this naked beauty with strings of beads and buttons round her neck, arms and waist' (William Bradley, *A Voyage to New South Wales*, 29 January 1788)." The camera pans down into the Cross. We hear oars rowing, heavy rhythmic breathing, and bird calls. As the camera draws nearer, cars can be heard and the heavy breathing becomes more pronounced. There is a certain ambiguity. It could be the sound of people rowing a boat or two people having sex. The relationships between sex, conquest, and exchange are central to the film's narrative. By combining this suggestion of sex with Bradley's text, Moffatt draws parallels between the colonial desire to possess "the land" and the

male's desire to sexually possess and conquer "the other." Contrasting the sounds of the past with those of modern-day Kings Cross, she draws a further analogy. This red-light district has been created to cater to the pleasures, fascination, and desires of tourists or visitors—it is another site of conquest and desire.

In the first voice-over a nineteenth-century Captain from the colonial period recounts his experiences with Aboriginal women. He describes them as consciously feigning coyness, flirting with the sailors in order to obtain gifts, and then, once "out of reach," acting in an uncouth manner: "If ever they deign to come near you to take a present, they appear as coy, shy, and timorous as a maid on her wedding night. But when they are as they think, out of your reach, they hollow and chatter to you, frisk and flirt and play one hundred wanton pranks equal in significance to the solicitations of a Covent Garden strumpet."

During this voice-over, the camera tracks three Aboriginal women walking through Kings Cross. We see them from the legs down. There are cut-aways to neon signs—"Les Girls" and "Exotic"—and to shop windows. On the words "Covent Garden strumpet" the camera pulls up to focus on the faces of the women, chatting happily as they walk along. The Captain's romantic and sentimental tone is offset by subtitles reflecting the women's perspective. Although dressed in white, they are hardly "maids on their wedding night," but neither are they "strumpets." Their words describe the strategy they will follow to secure the finances for their night out, underlining their consent in relation to the events about to be acted out:

If we've got nothing else to do we usually go up to the Cross any night of the week.

Friday and Saturday nights are the best nights.

Most of the time we've never got any money so we pick up a Captain and make him pay for our good time.

Further subtitles link the women's attitudes with the early days of colonial contact:

We call them Captains because that's what our mothers and grandmothers have always called them.

Our relatives don't like us to follow in their footsteps this way, but how can we not when we've got no money?

The presence of a female perspective, an emic viewpoint,⁴ undermines the colonial male narrative. By incorporating their motivations and expectations into her account of this cross-cultural dynamic, Moffatt empowers her female characters. She allows them to “speak” in the Spivakian sense, implying a position of knowingness and power (Spivak 1994).

The interplay of voices reflects the motivations and desires of both sides. In this dynamic choices are made by both parties, each expecting some form of reward or satisfaction: in the women’s case a night out and in the Captain’s, the company and attention of two black women. The women entertain no romantic or sentimental visions of the Captain, he is merely a means to an end. Just as Captain pursues them, they actively seek his company, encouraging him to lavish attention on them. There can only be one winner in this contest, however, and in this instance it is the women who emerge as victors and survivors.

As Moffatt weaves colonial and modern-day narratives, our understanding of the past becomes inextricably linked with our understanding of the present. Moffatt highlights the interdependency of colonizer and colonized. She presents an urban context in which the women adapt to their economic and social space by knowingly adopting certain stereotypical guises in order to obtain a desired outcome. In the subtitles the women tell us how they will act and what they hope to achieve: “They like to be seen escorting two black women down the street.” “After a while we might talk the old bastard into buying us dinner.” “We take him to the most expensive restaurant we can find.” “They usually like to drink a lot and we like to encourage them.” “This way they’re more helpless and less likely to get nasty with us.” “If you know what we mean.” Clearly, Moffatt sees that Aboriginal women were and are not always helpless victims of white male desire and fantasy.

The Captain’s narrations reflect his agenda and motivations. He has no desire to know the women and is prompted by his sexual desire to ensure the means to his end—which in this case is not fulfilled. The voice-overs refer to a range of stereotypes of Aboriginal women. There is an overriding sense of ambivalence in the colonial Captains’ descriptions. Aboriginal women are cast as timid and coy, yet at the same time wanton and flirting; sensual and exotic, yet also primitive and wild; alluring yet calculating; but above all simple, childlike, and pitiable, objects of fascination and disdain. *Nice Coloured Girls* turns the tables on the conventional stereotype of the black woman as the debased, exploited, and often physically assaulted victim, for it is the Captain who ends up collapsed and robbed in the bar and the women who escape from the scene stating: “It has usually been a good night.”

Homi Bhabha’s ingredients of fixity, fantasy, repetition, and ambivalence are pivotal in the production and dissemination of stereotypes (1994). These

operate simultaneously for the women and the Captain alike. Fixity, defined by skin color, operates as the crucial determinant in the way that the Captain treats the women and the way they treat him.

For the women, the Captain represents a role that dates back centuries. This role has more to do with what Bhabha terms “that conjunction of infinite repetition”—the white man fixed as Captain played out or repeated by generations of Aboriginal women—than by his existence as an individual. For the Captain the women are “nice colored girls,” objects of exotic longing, women to be seen with, products of a century-old colonial desire. The women and the Captain both essentialize each other. Ironically, the Captain who has traditionally assumed the role of colonizer—the exploiter of indigenous people/women—ends up being exploited in turn. Traditionally cast as passive victims, the women emerge as the victors.

By constantly linking the modern-day with the past, through voice-over and *mise-en-scène*, Moffatt suggests that this dynamic began with the very creation of the stereotypes involved. She implies that the ambivalence that the Captain feels for the women is mirrored in the ambivalence that they feel and have always felt for him. Neither the Captain nor the women want to learn from each other. Both are content to base their views on experiences learned from their respective cultural backgrounds, negotiating through stereotypes and projected desires.

Stereotypes can be knowingly adopted and projected in order to fulfill desires. The women's conscious adoption or mimicking of a cultural stereotype, like their projecting of a stereotype onto the Captain, reflects the complex and multilayered dynamic that the stereotype signifies. Unlike Frantz Fanon's archetypal black man whose body lies “sprawled out, distorted, re-coloured, clad in the mourning in that white winter day” (1967:113), Moffatt's black protagonists leave the white Captain lying sprawled, robbed, and helpless stating: “We don't feel sorry for him because he should be at home with his family.” “When we want to leave, we roll him and leave him for dead.”

Moffatt inserts nondiegetic scenes into the film. They work to remind the viewer that the film is a fiction as opposed to “reality” while contributing to themes of consent, conquest, exchange, and colonization.

Several of these scenes consist of head-and-shoulder shots of an Aboriginal woman staring into the camera on an empty beach. She appears at the beginning and the end of the film. This anonymous woman watches on from an eye-of-god position. It is as if she is watching and responding to the story. She first appears when the women are approached by the Captain, and she appears concerned. The shot cuts back to the bar scene, as the Captain offers the women cigarettes and a light. The woman on the beach nods and laughs.

She seems to approve of their actions, their strategy. Perhaps it is familiar to her. The subtitle reads: "First they offer us smokes."

Toward the end of the film, when the Captain lies drunk and sprawled over a table and the camera zooms in on his pocket, to his wallet, we return to the woman looking on from the beach. She seems concerned and slightly sad. The shot cuts back to the bar as a black hand steals his wallet. The woman on the beach laughs approvingly and then runs off camera, foreshadowing the modern-day women's gleeful escape in the taxi.

The woman at the beach could be read in a number of ways. She could symbolize the modern-day women's ancestor or some kind of guardian. Her site—a deserted, rocky, wind-swept beach—is timeless. As an archetypal role-model figure for Aboriginal women, however, she presents contradictions. She is simultaneously concerned and amused, she seems distant yet directly engages with the narrative. She also appears to know the motivations of the women. By presenting such a figure, Moffatt challenges assumptions that as an author or a filmmaker she must provide only positive indigenous role models.

Another series of nondiegetic inserts are reenactments of various kinds of relationships between "Captains" and "nice colored girls." These shots are staged before framed colonial images.⁵ In the first an Aboriginal woman secures a sailor's money pouch after a brief struggle, foreshadowing the end of the main narrative. In the background is a framed picture of Botany Bay in the early years of colonial contact.

The second reenactment finds three Aboriginal women climbing a rope ladder, presumably to board a European ship to exchange sex for material goods. The colonial voice-over recounts:

Several girls protected in the settlement had not any objection to passing the night on board of ships, though some had learnt shame enough to conceal on their landing the spoils they had procured during their stay. They had also discovered that we thought it shameful to be seen naked, and I have observed many of them extremely reserved and delicate in this respect when before us, but when in the presence of only their own people perfectly indifferent about their appearance.

The image in the background is of a dry-docked bow of a ship, possibly from the first fleet. Flashing neon lights are reflected against the set. Car noises merge with the sound of lapping waves. It is as if the present were being reflected in the past.

In the third reenactment, an Aboriginal woman uses spray paint to obscure a picturesque European landscape, then smashes with a rock the glass protecting the image. The broken, blackened glass reveals the landscape completely undamaged: "A native woman had a child by one of our people. On its coming into the world, she perceived it different in its color, for which not knowing how to account, she endeavored to supply by art what was deficient in nature and held the poor babe repeatedly over the smoke of her fire and rubbed its little body with ashes and dirt to restore it to the hue with which her other children had been born." The notion of "breaking the frame" comes immediately to mind: the framing or colonization of the land, of indigenous peoples and cultural practices; frames of reference; the frame as facade; the frame as a depiction of the world; frameworks of histories; and the framing of colonial narratives. The landscape is the last framed image we see. The wall of the studio set falls backward to reveal a darkened theater, reminding us that we are watching a movie and encouraging us to take an active role, to consider the complex problematics of conquest, consent, and exchange in relation to the construction of colonial discourse. It's a Brechtian conceit.

Moffatt uses another type of nondiegetic insert to focus on the body and notions of cross-cultural inscription and intertextuality. There is a brief shot of a white man's hand clutching—possibly examining—a black woman's head. The voice-over recalls a Captain's horror and pity toward an Aboriginal woman whose head and body show evidence of sexual and domestic violence caused by Aboriginal men. Moffatt also inserts a shot of a white man's hand being placed on a black woman's back, sprinkled with gold dust and removed, leaving behind a black hand imprint outlined in the gold dust, and then a shot of a black woman's hand being placed on a white man's back, leaving behind a white hand imprint in the gold. By rendering hand imprints onto black women's and white men's bodies, Moffatt explores the idea of inscription and the body, alluding again to notions of ownership—another form of cultural cartography. Just as the male and female perspectives are presented in the major narrative, Moffatt presents white and black bodies inscribed with "the other's" handprint. The idea of intertextuality again emerges. Bhabha describes the body within colonial discourse as "inscribed with both the economies of pleasure and desire and the economies of discourse, domination and power" (1994:67). Within the narrative framing of the film, Moffatt highlights the strategies and expectations of both parties to expose the theaters of economics and desire and to make explicit the ways that the indigenous women and white men negotiate with each other in terms of projected stereotypes.

We end where we began, with an aerial shot of downtown Sydney. Now it is the early hours of the morning. Over this image we hear one last voice-over, providing an ironic conclusion:

After this I never saw her but once, when I happened to near the harbor's mouth in a boat with Captain Ball. We met her in a canoe with several more of her sex. She was painted for a ball with stripes of red earth from head to foot so that she no longer looked like the same goridiana. We offered her several presents, which she readily accepted, but finding our eagerness and solicitude to inspect her, she managed her canoe with such address as to elude our too near approach and acted the coquette to admiration.

By referencing the events of the narrative with a traditional past, we see that the roles have not changed. The Aboriginal women are still cast as nice colored girls and the white male is still the Captain. Rather than creating new and empowered Aboriginal role models for the 1990s, Moffatt chooses to site her antiheroines within a colonial tradition, a continuum. She deals not so much with the colonial or indigenous experience but with the complex that emerges in the interstice—in the space between the colonized and the colonizer. By reinscribing colonial images and rewriting historical narratives, Moffatt creates hybridized narrations that challenge the linear, “authentic” accounts written in the colonial or master's voice. *Nice Coloured Girls* highlights the fact that colonial encounters cannot be understood in snug binaries of oppressor and oppressed.

NOTES

1. *Nice Coloured Girls*, 17 min., video, color. Produced, directed, and written by Tracey Moffatt. Distributed by AFI Distribution Limited, 49 Eastern Road, South Melbourne, Victoria 3205, Australia; phone 03-696-1844; fax 03-696-7972.

2. In the film credits Moffatt cites the following references to colonial texts: Watkin Trench, *A Complete Account of the Settlement of Port Jackson* (London, 1793); *English Passage: An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, vol. 1 (London, 1798); and *A Voyage to New South Wales: The Journal of Lieutenant William Bradley RN of HMS Sirius, 1786-1792*.

3. Increasingly, writers dealing with issues of culture and representation are problematizing the notion that indigenous artists should only present their cultures in a positive light, as this denies the complexity and diversity of expression in the articulation of historical experiences. See Hooks 1992b and Hall 1996.

4. In this discussion, I use the term “emic” to refer to the position of looking or writing from the inside out. “Etic” refers to the position of looking or writing from the outside in.

5. Representations of landscape often function as visual metaphors for colonial possession and occupation. W. J. T. Mitchell describes landscape paintings as “a medium of exchange” and “a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism” (1994:5).

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